

Sharecropping

The concept of sharecropping evolved in the South out of economic necessity. The South's main industry, farming, only operated successfully with free slave labor. After the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, and passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, the white plantation owners found themselves "land rich but cash poor," with no one to work their land and no money to hire anyone to do it. The mass exodus of former slaves to the North and the absence of any other profitable industry added to the region's woes.

Many of the freed slaves who stayed in the South knew only one vocation—farming—but they were no longer content to work for somebody; they wanted to own land and support their families. Unfortunately, none of these men had any money, nor owned the things needed to operate a successful farm. Thus, sharecropping became the norm.

Landowners, usually whites, would lease a portion of their land, along with tools, seed, fertilizer, and other necessities, to former slaves or poor whites. In return, the sharecroppers paid their debts with interest to the landowners by giving them a portion of their crops. Since the farmers had no money, plantation owners operated stores that sold needed goods, which the farmers "charged," and the bill was "paid" with another portion of the crops. Whatever portion of the crops was left over after the sharecroppers paid their bills could be sold and the profit kept. However, there was rarely any portion of the crops left over or any profit made. The farmers were obliged to continue this arrangement year after year in vain hope of getting out of debt, creating a never-ending cycle of poverty.

Many sharecropping agreements were verbal. Some of the sharecroppers actually signed written contracts, but, often illiterate, they could not read these agreements to understand that they heavily favored the landowners. Examples of this inequality can be found in samples of old contracts stipulating that the landowners or their agents could specify how the land was cultivated. In addition, those who raised cotton were required to pay to have it ginned on the plantation before turning it over to the owner.

The Freedmen's Bureau was created to regulate this system. It attempted to establish model contracts that protected sharecroppers, proposed a standard payment of one-third of the crops for a year's rent, and created a council to settle disputes between landowners and sharecroppers. The sharecroppers formed organizations such as the Colored Farmers' Alliance and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union to aid and support their members. The federal government established the U.S. Farm Security Administration to help stop the abuse of sharecroppers, but still it continued.

So why did freed slaves choose to stay despite such a harsh lifestyle? Sharecroppers hoped they could ultimately buy their own farms. This method of farming continued from Reconstruction until the Civil Rights Movement. Falling crop prices, continued black migration to the North after World War II, and more rights and opportunities for blacks finally destroyed this way of life, but not before it left its mark on generations struggling to survive.